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ABSTRACT

A German language class project designed to develop individual learner autonomy involved a third-year class and a sixth-year class of girls in the production of a fashion show using slides and narration. A variety of related class activities were used: choosing pictures, making suggestions to people about what to wear, analyzing clothing types, discussing clothing preferences, and describing clothes the students wore as children or clothing worn by children of other generations. The topic of clothing was determined from a survey of the students, but other topics appropriate for a similar project include vehicles, animals, and pop stars. (MSE)

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DEVELOPING LEARNER AUTONOMY THROUGH MATERIALS

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DEVELOPING LEARNER AUTONOMY THROUGH MATERIALS

It would be ideal if we could encourage students to take as much responsibility as possible for the content, the preparation and the teaching of their courses. At the beginning of the school year the aims set by the examinations and by the students themselves should be discussed with the teacher. From then on, implementation of the goals would have to be closely monitored mainly by the students with help from the teacher. In an ideal situation, the teacher's role would consist mostly of supplying materials and giving advice.

Experiences in Denmark and Germany

In talks given recently to the I.T.E. Modern Languages Project in Dublin, Leni Dam from Denmark and Hans-Eberhard Piepho from Germany have both explained with the aid of video recordings how learner autonomy can be achieved. Leni Dam had a class of fairly low achievers motivated in such a way that they worked nearly independently in groups and decided for themselves what tasks they would tackle on any given day, always bearing their set goal in mind. Leni Dam is considered unique even in Denmark, but this should not deter us from emulating some of her ideas here in Ireland.

Professor Piepho showed a film of a second-year French class in which most of the teaching was done through the medium of French by the students themselves, naturally after a lot of preparation by the native French teacher. This class seemed to consist of children of similar background, sitting at tables which were grouped in horse-shoe shape in front of a blackboard, with a slide projector in the classroom.

Professor Piepho also outlined a most interesting experiment which says much about the importance of learner autonomy. Three schools were selected: nothing was done in the first school; in the second school the English teachers were given intensive training; and in the third school nothing was done except that a lot of pictures, posters, etc. were displayed relating to the themes to be covered in the English classes. The result of the experiment was that the performance of pupils in the first school did not improve; that of pupils in the second school improved only slightly; while the performance of pupils in the third school showed a marked improvement.

The situation in Ireland

Here in Ireland the situation is of course quite different

from that in Denmark or Germany. In many classes we have to cater for a very wide range of abilities and backgrounds. Classes can be extremely large and seating arrangements are almost never of the kind seen in Denmark and Germany. There is another vital factor which militates against genuine learner autonomy, and that is that students, on the whole, are not used to taking decisions on the "what" and the "how" of their learning.

All this is by way of an introduction to my own efforts to encourage learner autonomy. All groups of learners are different, but my experience may serve to stimulate other teachers.

Third-year students learn about fashion

I got a class of mixed-ability girls of about 14 years to fill in a questionnaire about the topics they would most like to talk about:

1) What I like to talk about with my best friend:

Boys	11	School	7	Other	12
My friends	8	Sport	6		
Clothes	8	Pop/stars	5		

2) What I would like to talk about to a person of my own age whom I had just met:

School	7	Music	6
Family	6	Friends	5
Hobbies	6	Sport	2

3) What else I would like to learn about in German:

Fashion	3	Parties/ discos	3
Music	2	Other	7
Sport	2		

There are of course many ways of introducing these topics, but I will describe what I did with the help of 6th-year students. The following were the main stages:

1) Questionnaire given to 3rd-year students.
2) Pictures selected by 6th-year students.
3) Commentary written by 6th-year students.
4) Slides produced.
5) Commentary spoken on to cassette.
6) 3rd-year students filled in grid while listening to and watching fashion show.
7) 3rd-year students matched pictures to captions.

After we had decided on the topic I asked my 6th-year students to select from fashion magazines pictures of clothes they thought 3rd-year students would like to wear, bearing in mind that they should select a variety of outfits, patterns, material, etc. They cut out the pictures and glued them on to white paper. The students took their work home and composed a fashion commentary for each picture. Next day this was held up in class and described. As there were only 11 students in the 6th-year class this worked very well and small errors could be corrected.

Then I noticed my mistake in letting the students cut around the clothes: they would not be suitable for the slides I wanted to make! Another set of pictures had to be selected. The captions were removed from them, but otherwise they were not cut out. I saved the captions in an envelope and had slides made (at a cost of £3.50 each) by CPL, 11 Merrion Square, Dublin 2, tel. 767890. It would be much cheaper to take the slides yourself, or better still to ask one of the students to do it. The slides were definitely worth investing in. The students found them much more exciting than the pictures from magazines.

The making of the slides took a week, and as there was now not enough time to get new captions written by the 6th-year students, I made up a commentary and spoke it on to cassette myself. But I must admit, the girls' commentary would have been better.

If any other teacher would like to do a similar project she could speak the commentary herself or get a native speaker to do it. Either way works well, for the students are so thrilled with with the slides that they do not mind if the description of the clothes is a bit unprofessional.

Now back to the 3rd-year pupils: Mindful of Professor Piepho's experiment, referred to above, I put up as many fashion pictures as possible on the notice board in the classroom. I did not put them all up at once, so that the students would have something new to look at every day. In retrospect I am quite sure that I should have asked the girls themselves to cut out the pictures and captions from magazines.

One lesson was then spent finding out what the learners wanted to say about a boy they liked and a boy they did not like. This was most enjoyable, for according to the questionnaire it is their favourite topic of conversation with their friends. For homework they drew the two boys and described them as well as their characteristics. Here I was able to slip in some characteristics which I thought important, and these were accepted by the girls. The best pictures and descriptions were put up in the classroom.

Developing this topic, the next lesson consisted of a revision of the imperative. Using German imperative forms, the

students had to tell one person, two people or the teacher to put on different garments. Experience has shown that hats, gloves and a waistcoat are articles of clothing which are easy to put on.

In the third lesson "Wie findest du das?" ("How do you like that?") and "Das finde ich ..." ("I think this is ...") were introduced. The students had already acquired a large vocabulary for describing clothes during the previous lessons. Next the following grid in German was distributed and explained:

CLOTHES	DESCRIPTION	PRICE

It is important to say that the grid had to be filled in in the target language: students are used to answering in English in the new foreign language examinations.

We found that the room with the slide projector had only one socket, and a student had to be sent to locate a cassette recorder with a battery. So we looked at the pictures without the commentary and the students were invited to give their opinion on the different outfits, which they enjoyed doing.

When we had a suitable cassette recorder the fashion show started and the students filled in the grid while looking at the pictures and listening to the cassette. A student operated the projector and I worked the cassette recorder. We managed to get through the material one and a half times.

During the next lesson the tape was played once more on its own and the entries discussed. Then the magazine pictures were put on the walls with Blu-tack and they had to be matched to their original captions, which were photocopied in a jumbled up way on the reverse side of the grid. It is a good idea to number the pictures and put letters in front of the captions. I made thirteen slides, and this was a suitable number.

The number of each slide should be spoken on to the cassette as this makes it easier to fill in the grid and operate the projector. Finally, students of both classes could be asked to write about the clothes they have worn from babyhood, or about the fashions their grandparents, their parents and they themselves have worn.

Other topics suitable for this type of project would be vehicles, animals and pop stars. If you are genuinely interested in learner autonomy it would be worth your while to read the material and look at the videos produced by both Leni Dam and Hans-Eberhard Piepho.